

Julie McCown

Animating the Corpse: The Sutured Hybridity of Animal Puppets in Ladislav Starewitch's *The Tale of the Fox*

In the 1937 stop motion film *The Tale of the Fox*, Ladislav Starewitch¹ painstakingly re-creates animal bodies, ranging from lions to flies, with astonishing detail; the animal puppets are capable of intricate and widely varied facial expressions and almost all possess unnervingly realistic mouths (lips, teeth, tongues, and even drool). These animal bodies, however, do not remain pristine and untouched; they are subjected to all manner of bodily indignities that leave them mutilated, scarred, or stripped to mere bones. The film does not hide the animal body, living or dead, from viewers. It refuses to let the viewer forget that these puppets represent physical animal bodies. This foregrounding of physical animal bodies has become a common feature of recent animal studies criticism. One of the most salient examples, but certainly not the only, is Nicole Shukin's theory of animal capital with its rendering of animal bodies as both semiotic and material currency (21). This doubling of the animal body is also a feature of Sarah Kay's work, particularly her examination of the ethical implications of medieval books in which animals are both the subject of the text and the material upon which the text is written. When describing "the uncanny conjunction of flayed skin in the text with the flayed skin of the page," Kay uses the term "suture," which she defines as "a short-circuiting between the usually distinct levels of text and book which might entirely escape conscious perception, but which nevertheless obtrudes on the reader. The effect of this short-circuiting is uncanny in the sense that it insinuates a disturbance in the field of symbolization, even if this disturbance is not itself symbolized" (15).²

While Kay refers to medieval texts and reading practices, I argue that this concept can be applied to films as well, particularly Starewitch's *The Tale of the Fox*.³ This application is apt given how film stock, like the medieval book, is created from animal bodies. As Shukin explains, the gelatin used in film stock is made from the rendered "skin, bones, and connective tissue of cattle, sheep, and pigs" (104). In *The Tale of the Fox*, this contingency on animal material is complicated further because the film's animal puppets were constructed from materials including wire, wood, and deer skin (Pummell, "Of Rats and Men" 61). *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets are both a type of mimesis of animal bodies and products created from the remains of dead animals. Starewitch not only relies on the skin of animals to create his animal puppets, but, to

bring those puppets to life on film, he depends upon yet another group of dead animal bodies. Therefore, I argue that Shukin's double animal sign of "disembodied signifier of seamless motion and mere material processed in staggering quantities at accelerating speeds through the abattoirs and reduction plants of the West" (111) is doubled again in *The Tale of the Fox*, as the double rendering of animals on film and in film stock merges with the double rendering of animals as puppets and puppet-making material, resulting in a state of sutured hybridity within the animal puppet bodies.

In adapting the concept of suture from Kay, I use the concept of "sutured hybridity" as a way of theorizing representations of animal bodies. The state of sutured hybridity occurs when an animal body (or a representation of an animal body) becomes the site of one or more sutures. I define suture as a site of short-circuiting in which two distinct levels are brought into contact, sutured or stitched together, to create a state of sutured hybridity, an intermediary zone that disturbs or unsettles the previous distinctions. The suture, with its medical connotations of stitched-together flesh, is dependent upon a material, physical presence, a dependence that distinguishes it from existing concepts of suture in film studies.⁴ This dependence also distinguishes sutured hybridity from the concept of liminality. While both concepts focus on the malleability of existing boundaries, sutured hybridity's emphasis on physical, material animal bodies creates a kind of tangibility and concreteness not found in liminality.

Within *The Tale of the Fox's* production, distribution, and narrative, a series of four sutures arise in the animal puppets. The puppets exist as sutured hybrid beings, occupying an intermediary zone where binaries converge. They are simultaneously products of a medieval past and a technologically mediated future, animal and human, alive and dead, and participants in a humanist and posthumanist discourse. Each site of suture builds on the previous one, creating an increasingly complex, multi-faceted state of sutured hybridity that reveals how interactions between humans and animals primarily revolve around animal subjugation and agency. After tracing out these four sites of suture and analyzing how they impact animal representations, I conclude my essay by briefly contrasting *The Tale of the Fox* with Wes Anderson's 2009 stop motion film *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Juxtaposing the two films reinforces the complexity and contradictions of *The Tale of the Fox's* depiction of animal bodies, as well as the animal puppets' status as sutured hybrid beings. Sutured hybridity and its attendant emphasis on physicality and materiality enable us to confront our moral and ethical responsibility to real animal bodies in a way not possible with previous critical interpretations of animal representation. Sutured hybridity reinforces the reality that real animals and

their systematic exploitation by humans always accompany, on some level, any representation of animals that we create.

Past and Future: Medieval Fables and YouTube Videos. As an adaptation of the medieval fable of Reynard the Fox (based on the eighteenth-century version by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) and as a film that is most accessible as a series of YouTube videos,⁵ *The Tale of the Fox* straddles very different historical periods. As a result, the film's animal puppets reveal the way animal representation is defined by specific moments in human history and culture. In this way, the puppets reflect Jonathan Burt's argument that animals can be "associated with the archaic and nostalgic" and "become central figures in the presentation of new and 'progressive' technology" (291). At the same time that *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets adhere to medieval understandings of animals, particularly as they appear in the stories of Reynard the Fox, they also exist as reminders of an increasingly technologized society in which humans become further and further removed from real animals. *The Tale of the Fox's* more disturbing, violent moments exhibit what Simon Pummell refers to as "the element of glee and sadism found in old folk tales" ("Of Rats and Men" 61). Starewitch's use of the Reynard story is fitting because, as one of the most notable fox figures in folklore,⁶ Reynard is a cunning trickster figure whose fluidity and malleability make him an animal representation particularly well-suited for a discussion of sutured hybridity. *The Tale of the Fox's* connection to the long tradition of Reynard strengthens its animal puppets' connection to medieval sensibilities about animal bodies, sensibilities inextricably tied to systematic exploitation of animals.⁷ *The Tale of the Fox's* medieval heritage stresses the sutures in the animal puppets between human and animal and living and dead, while at the same time setting up its own suture.

By returning to Goethe's version of Reynard the Fox, one can observe the bodily indignities and beatings with an emphasis on the animals' skin or flesh. For example, the Panther describes the wounds on the Hare caused by Reynard: "Yon stands our timid Friend; and in his flesh / You still may see his wounds all raw and fresh" (Goethe 7). This threat of damage to animal flesh also comes from humans, such as the Carter who considers making a cap and bag out of Reynard's skin (Goethe 9). Starewitch's film intensifies this focus on the injury to animal flesh since the puppets' physical presence mimics the physical presence of real animals in a way that cannot occur with the written fable and its accompanying illustrations. The effect of this physical presence can

be felt in a scene in *The Tale of the Fox* where the Bear comes before the Lion King after being beaten by humans (see fig. 4). The Bear laments to the Lion King, "I've had a beating, Sire. I'm just a poor, bruised and battered bear, Sire. [...] The treacherous Reynard set a bear-trap for me, Sire. A whole gang of peasants set upon me and talked of selling my skin. It is horrible, but now that it is damaged, they let me go" (*The Tale of the Fox*). As the Bear recounts the possibility of humans stripping him of his skin and selling it, viewers watch the badly beaten animal shudder and weep, a physical animal presence not found in the written story. Despite being a pitiable situation, this scene is still pleasurable to view because viewers have a moment of sympathetic identification with the bear. The pleasurable quality of this identification is similar to Kay's argument that medieval readers derived pleasure in reading from "the potential mobility and contingency of skins that have been furnished for this purpose, and which the reader too can play with assuming" (24-25). The viewer's ability to traverse temporarily the gap between human and bear is facilitated through the concept of suture in film studies. In this case, the suture comes to embody George Butte's characterization of sutures as a "deceptive consolations" (284). The bear's body becomes the viewer's body and the viewer momentarily assumes his battered, threatened skin, even while still realizing that as a human he or she is implicated in this type of commoditization and destruction of animal skin. In other words, the human viewer becomes conscious of the multiple levels of suture present in the animal puppet's body.

Even as *The Tale of the Fox* engages with a medieval human-animal dynamic in which humans and animals maintain a close (and violent) relationship, it also reveals how technology increasingly mediates humans' interactions with animals. This technological mediation creates what Jonathan Burt, among many others, refers to as "the disappearance of the animal" (290). Akira Mizuta Lippit also theorizes on the "disappearing animal presence," arguing that "modern technology can be seen as a massive mourning apparatus" for their absence (125). Partly because of the system of animal capital Shukin discusses, humans in a large part of the Western world have become distanced from animal bodies and the ways they are exploited. This distance from animals leads, Boria Sax argues, to the revival of "some of the numinous qualities [animals] had in the archaic past" (276). A film like *The Tale of the Fox* enables a revival of what Pummell terms "an essentially pre-cinematic culture of folklore and animism," while at the same time "[presaging] the increasingly composite cinema which the digital future may bring" ("Ladislaw Starewicz" 125). The opening and closing scenes of *The Tale of the Fox* perfectly illustrate how the animal puppets evince the suturing of medieval past and technological future. The film opens with a monkey puppet acting as a film projectionist (see fig. 1). The projector begins to run a film within a film where a

second monkey puppet provides a second framing device in the form of a *Le Roman de Renard* book (see fig. 2). The monkey flips through the pages of the book, introducing each of the “heroes” of the story who pop out of the book’s pages, before the film moves within the book to tell the story of Reynard. When the monkey introduces Reynard, Reynard hides behind his page in the book, tearing a hole in the page in order to peek through it. This manipulation of the page demonstrates the film’s heightened consciousness of the book as a physical object, which, like an animal body, is capable of manipulation and destruction.

These nested framing devices produce a meta-awareness in which viewers perceive how this story is rendered through multiple levels of mediation: first through a book, then through a film within a film, before finally reaching the viewer. The viewer is only able to view the story’s animals from this triple remove. The remove actually becomes quadrupled in the twenty-first century because, for American audiences, *The Tale of the Fox* is available most readily as a series of six YouTube videos uploaded in 2009. Viewers’ distance from the animals is increased by the film’s virtual Internet presence. Although Richard Burt considers the effect of digitalization with DVD editions of films on “the integrity of the film object” (2), he does not consider YouTube and its effect on the film. Unlike computer-animated animals who never possessed material bodies, *The Tale of the Fox*’s animal puppets possess an original material presence that is then removed.⁸ While the YouTube videos of Starewitch’s film provide a remarkable level of access for both film scholars and stop motion fans who are grateful to be able to view the film in any form, the film’s fragmented state carries important implications for my argument.



Fig. 1. The monkey projectionist and human hand. (YouTube. Web. 20 March 2012.)



Fig. 2. The second monkey puppet in the film within a film (left). The monkey puppet introducing the book *Le Roman de Renard* (right). (YouTube. Web. 20 March 2012.)

The YouTube videos result in fragmentation and a loss of corporeality for *The Tale of the Fox* that parallels the disappearance of the animal. Lippit's discussion of technology and animals, particularly his connection of visual mimesis and the animal gaze through their shared ability to create "the remove from fact that restores an awareness of the

fact's truth to the spectator" (121), helps illuminate the multiple levels of remove and mediation that occur in the YouTube videos of *The Tale of the Fox*. The film's rendering of animal bodies through book, film, and Internet removes viewers from the fact of animal death while calling attention to this fact and mourning the loss of the corporeal animal body. Lippit's contention that animals are "unable to achieve the finitude of death" and "constantly move from one body to another, one system to another" (128), helps explain the sutured hybridity of *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets. The animal puppets as representations of animals cannot, in fact, die the same way real, living animals can. Unlike the undying animal specters of Lippit's theory, *however*, *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets do maintain an immediate corporeal existence as physical puppets constructed from dead animals. In her critique of Lippit, Shukin, "[b]y implicating slaughter in the symbolic economy of cinema and cinema in the ulterior violence of animal disassembly, [resists] Lippit's valorization of cinema as a salvaging apparatus that shelters or encrypts vanishing 'animal traits'" (103-04). Then again, when a film features animal puppets, there exists the possibility of a compromise between Lippit's undying animal and Shukin's disassembled animal corpses. The animal puppets' undying, virtual presence combines with an insistence on the animals' material, physical presence, resulting in a suture (within the animal puppet body) between medieval past and technologically mediated future that unsettles traditional notions of history as linear and progressive.

Animal and Human: Anthropomorphism and Puppets. In addition to facilitating the suture of past and future, *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppet bodies exhibit a second suture, between animals and humans, which intensifies their state of sutured hybridity. The film features anthropomorphic animals who speak, walk on two legs, wear clothing, and follow human systems of law and order. This anthropomorphism, however, is not a seamless blending of animal and human. Rather, it displays, according to Paul Wells, the "tensions between animality and humanity" (*Understanding Animation* 63). Pummell argues that Starewitch "used animal characters to make us look at humans in the light of animals rather than the sentimental reverse" ("Of Rats and Men" 61). Although the human puppets' sole function of chasing animals and beating them senseless appears barbaric and animalistic, the film does not so much depict humans becoming more like animals as show animals becoming more human. In fact, the animal puppets are far more detailed and fleshed-out than the small number of human puppets that appear in the film. While the smallest animal puppets were only

around one inch tall, the tallest puppet, the Lion King, stood almost 3.5 feet tall (Priebe 4-5). In contrast to the detail given to the animal puppets, the human puppets are far less carefully crafted and generally only appear in the film in long shots where the scale between animal and human is skewed. In one scene, Reynard leads the humans to where Wolf is trapped in the ice. As the camera cuts between Reynard and the humans, it becomes difficult to distinguish the humans from the fox. All are clothed, running on two feet, and roughly the same size. Reynard's ears, snout, and tail are really the only signs of species difference. The human puppet bodies are of little consequence; they merely exist as undeveloped plot devices. Starewitch chooses not to question the human body's singular wholeness and integrity. This difference between animal and human puppets suggests a speciesist framework in which the animal body is regarded as somehow better suited to serve as a site of suture than the human body.

In *The Tale of the Fox*, Starewitch provides numerous close-ups of his animal puppets' faces and mouths and often shows his puppets, particularly the Lion King and Reynard, touching or gesturing towards their mouths (see fig. 3). This focus on the animal face and mouth not only attests to the realistic quality of the animal puppets, but also prompts a moment of human identification with the animal. The prominence of mouths, which Kay argues function as "a zone of high affect" that makes the face legible (27), combined with the animal puppets' intricate facial expressions, creates a suture where the viewer registers both the animal and the human in the animal puppet. The melding of animal and human in the animal puppet body is taken to a further extreme with the puppet of Reynard's wife, who first appears holding an infant fox cub and nursing him with a baby bottle. When the bottle is empty, the fox cub pulls down his mother's dress to suckle at a very humanlike breast, as opposed to a realistic fox teat. In this instance, the puppet's body itself (not just its clothing) possesses both animal and human elements. Since the image is a mother nursing her child, this confusion of animal and human bodies, even though it possesses a certain repellant quality, fosters a sense of connection and identification between humans and animals. It also speaks to the complexity involved in anthropomorphism. This complexity arises because, as Sax argues, "no animal completely lacks humanity, yet no person is ever completely human. [...] We merge with animals through magic, metaphor, or fantasy, growing their fangs and putting on their feathers" (277). Merging the animal with the human through the fantasy of stop motion film, *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets make it impossible to fully separate the human and the animal.



Fig. 3. Close-up of the Lion King's mouth. (YouTube. Web. 20 March 2012.)



Fig. 4. The Bear after being badly beaten by humans. (YouTube. Web. 20 March 2012.)

In addition to the animals being bipedal and possessing human anatomy, another noticeable human trait of the film's animal puppets is their clothing. The animal puppets wear elaborate medieval-era costumes, including coats trimmed with fur, prompting Pummell to wonder: "What does it mean to dress animals in their own skin?" ("Of Rats and Men" 61). The irony of dressing animals in fur coats plays on medieval texts that feature animal skins both as subject matter and book-making material where, "as the animals, burlesque-like, assume human clothing, readers may well see themselves as doing the converse and assuming animal hide" (Kay 26). Although Kay discusses human-clothed animals in stories written down in medieval books made from animal skin, the sense of irony and suture between real animal skin and its representation is applicable to *The Tale of the Fox*, especially when considered alongside the role of animal bodies as material in film stock. The animal puppets' clothing compounds the ironic suture between real animal skins and its representation, especially in two scenes where animals lose their clothing. In the first scene, the Bear, as mentioned in the previous section, comes before the Lion King after being beaten by humans (see fig. 4). He is battered and his clothes have been all but completely torn off. As the Bear relates his story to the King, he uses a leaf to cover himself, as he is embarrassed by his nudity or, in Derrida's words, "ashamed of being as naked as a beast" (4). The animals in *The Tale of the Fox* are not the animals Derrida describes as possessing the unique property of "being naked without knowing it. Not being naked therefore, not having knowledge of their nudity, in short, without consciousness of good and evil" (4-5). As anthropomorphized animals, the film's animals lack this unique innocence and adopt a human sensibility about clothing and shame. Not all the animals, however, maintain this shame of nudity. At the film's end, when one of Reynard's fox cubs, shown the whole film wearing a diaper, celebrates his father's victory, the cub's diaper falls down. While initially embarrassed by his nudity, the cub quickly changes his mind and flings the diaper off-screen while merrily announcing to the viewer the film's end with the exclamation, "That's all folks!" Even though the fox cub is aware of his nudity, he no longer feels the human sense of shame. His tossing-away of his diaper signals Starewitch's intimation that there exists a basic level of animality that the fox cub embraces. Despite his performance at the hands of Starewitch, the fox cub is not completely mastered.⁹ When the fox cub revels in his nudity, the film is over; the animals are no longer performing and can return to their natural state, sans clothes.

One final way animal bodies work to confuse the border between animal and human is when the Lion King decrees that the eating of animals is forbidden in his kingdom. The

written decree states: “so that peace may reign, our subjects are forbidden to eat each other. Only vegetables, dairy produce, and fruit are permissible. From this day, the greatest love must reign in the land. Offenders will be hanged. Only the king shall be entitled to eat a little fresh meat on Thursdays and Sundays.” The film shows how this decree is entirely impractical, as virtually no animal follows it: the Lion King and Queen Lioness eat meat, Reynard eats meat, the Rooster eats a fly, and the Raven takes delight in the prospect of dining on fox meat. By eating animal flesh, the animal puppets enact a kind of identification with the animal that Lippit “[likens] to an ingestion of the animal, invoking the transferential logic of sacrifice. By consuming the animal in identification, the subject undergoes a becoming-animal in an effort to disappear from the realm of responsibility” (121). Starewitch’s film intimates that animals eating other animals is a natural occurrence that cannot be prevented and therefore should not be punished. Because the animal puppets are constantly blurring the distinctions between animals and humans, the Lion King’s decree of forced vegetarianism and its subsequent failure can be read in two ways. If the animal puppets are viewed as more animal than human, then their insistence on eating each other is an expression of their natural tendencies that humorously jars with the puppets’ anthropomorphization. As sutured hybrid beings that merge the animal and the human, however, the animal puppets emphasize a kinship between animals and humans, and suggest that humans, as animals, have a natural tendency to eat other animals. The question of whether or not this natural tendency is positive or negative goes unanswered.

Rather than use the suture between animals and humans as an opportunity to present viewers with a moral, Starewitch leaves his film more open-ended. This reluctance to offer a clear-cut moral reflects both Starewitch’s distaste for “Disney’s neutered morals and cuddly creatures” (Kewley) and his cultural grounding in the characteristic dark humor of the Eastern European stop motion animation tradition, a grounding that can clearly be seen in Starewitch’s early short films including *The Cameraman’s Revenge* and *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. Nonetheless, the animal-human suture produces an interesting paradox regarding animal subjugation and its dependence on a distinction between animals and humans.¹⁰ Within the film, the animal puppets resist the subjugation of humans and exist in a hybrid state that is neither fully human nor fully animal. Outside of the film, the animal puppets are completely subject to their creator, Ladislav Starewitch. Such an underlying paradox is tied inevitably to the sutured

hybridity of the animal puppet body as a site of both animal agency and complete subjugation.

Alive and Dead: Taxidermy Animals and Stop Motion Puppets. Drawing on the ironic juxtapositions of death and life found in taxidermy, *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets appear, not so much as realistic, live animals, but as realistic, dead animals preserved by humans. This taxidermy effect creates a third type of suture in the film where narratives of living and dead animals are brought together. This suture also further entwines humans and animals through a process of communion and physical intimacy. Understanding the motivations behind traditional taxidermy and animatronics helps situate *The Tale of the Fox* within a larger tradition of depicting animal death and life. Taxidermy focuses on the visual communion with the animal body constructed by the taxidermist. This visual communion foreshadows the technological mediation of animal representation discussed earlier. It also facilitates a connection between human and animal that would not have been possible without taxidermy because, as Donna Haraway observes of the taxidermy tableaux of the American Natural History Museum, “the animals in the dioramas have transcended mortal life. [...] This is a spiritual vision made possible only by their death and literal re-presentation. Only then could the essence of their life be present” (30). Such a description applies not only to these specific animals in this natural history museum but to any animal representation. In becoming a representation, animals transcend their mortal life and are re-presented as something not present in reality. This re-presentation captures some kind of perceived essence of the animal that will serve a specific purpose for the human who has constructed this new version of the animal. Building off this idea of a true essence in animal bodies, Jane Desmond connects the practice of taxidermy to animatronics, pointing out that both taxidermy and animatronics “are intensely ironic practices and call for a compelling intimacy between human bodies and animal ones” (159). That intimacy, however, “is always simultaneously marked by the distance and distinction between animals and humans” (175). This distance and distinction results because humans are the ones re-creating and re-presenting the animal bodies, effectively subjugating the animal despite its communion with humans.

Anthropomorphic taxidermy, particularly from the Victorian period in Great Britain, functions as an interesting analogue for *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets. Michelle Henning notes that, with anthropomorphic taxidermy, the interplay between life and death mixes with an “anti-naturalistic” depiction of animals, revealing nature not “as something eternal and outside human culture, but as something which is both cultural and historical” (664). Anthropomorphic taxidermy questions the traditional assumption

that nature and culture are distinct categories, insisting rather that animal bodies are always already entangled with humans at specific historical and cultural moments. According to Henning, there are limitations to anthropomorphic taxidermy that reveal the underlying subjugation of the animal body by humans: “The fact that the living animals’ bodies would not be able to manage the poses struck by their mounted skins heightens the sense that animals are being forced to populate human situations” (667). Unlike the animals of engravings or illustrations, taxidermied animals possess a physical presence that materially links them to real animals and brings the human manipulation of their dead bodies to the forefront. Elaborating on Henning’s work on Victorian anthropomorphic taxidermy, Connor Creaney focuses on how taxidermy tableaux are haunted by animal bodies: “These works are faithful to their anthropomorphizing vision to an unnerving degree, but are also haunted by these bodies’ prior autonomy” (16). This hauntedness combines with the “ghostly pseudo-human subjectivities” that inhabit the animal figures of taxidermy tableaux, resulting in an “[endless] flickering between body-and-object-states” (17). Animal figures in anthropomorphic taxidermy tableaux suture both living and dead animal bodies and animal and human bodies. Real animal death and loss of autonomy exist alongside the recreated animals’ illusion of pseudo-human lives, producing an endless tension between the two, as viewers are aware simultaneously of the animals’ former lives, their deaths, and their new “lives” as anthropomorphic animals. This tension, as it arises from the physical animal body, functions as a site of sutured hybridity.

Despite obvious similarities, traditional taxidermy and animatronics differ in important ways from anthropomorphic taxidermy and its analogue, *The Tale of the Fox’s* animal puppets. Whereas traditional taxidermy and animatronics strive to construct ever more seamless depictions of realistic animal life, anthropomorphic taxidermy and Starewitch’s animal puppets, in their re-creation of animal life from animal death, present narratives that do not endeavor to accurately represent reality. Furthermore, animatronics differ from stop motion puppets because animatronics are separated from their human creators. An animatronic animal can be controlled via a computer where the human is either far away or not even present in the same room when the animal is brought to life. Conversely, in stop motion, the filmmaker must manipulate by hand the animal puppet after every frame, resulting in a greater level of contact, of communion, between creator and animal creation. This lower-tech communion with the puppet body parallels the kind of communion with animal figures in anthropomorphic taxidermy.

The suturing of death and life in taxidermy, animatronics, anthropomorphic taxidermy, and stop motion puppets bears some resemblance to discussions of life and death in animation theory, particularly Cholodenko's discussion of how the animatic "problematizes any simple distinction between life and movement, animism and mechanism, human and nonhuman" ("Speculations" 501). Animation theory's discussion of life and death must be considered alongside distinctions between drawn and puppet animation because, as Suzanne Buchan notes, puppet animation "does have a direct relation to objects. Yet these objects are artificially constructed, thus the representation of a puppet, although identical with the object represented, has a different quality than objects that are not manipulated or constructed" (30). While Buchan calls attention to the different materialities of puppet animation and drawn animation, her distinction does not address the moral and ethical issues that arise in stop motion films that use real animal bodies in the creation of its puppets. Although Wells insists that "animators [...] demonstrate a particular empathy and affiliation with their animal subjects" (*The Animated Bestiary* 192), he does not consistently account for differences in animation mediums, including puppets constructed from real animals. In contrast, the suture I discuss in this section, based as it is in taxidermy, foregrounds animal bodies and their very real presences.

Directly linking his work to that of taxidermists, Starewitch's early short films utilized the dead bodies of animals such as insects and birds as stop motion puppets. In 1910, Starewitch's passion for entomology led him to shoot a series of natural history films for a museum in Lithuania (Kewley). Pummell recounts that, while shooting one of these films featuring a fight between two stag beetles, "one of the combatants died, so [Starewitch] animated the corpse and discovered his vocation in life. [...] Starewitch] spent the rest of his life involved in the manipulation of dead or artificial animals to create *tableaux vivants*" ("Of Rats and Men" 61). Pummell's use of the phrase *tableaux vivants* speaks perfectly to the anthropomorphic taxidermy influence I argue exists in *The Tale of the Fox*. Taxidermy tableaux focus on creating a frozen moment of time in an animal's life (either realistic or anthropomorphized). The tableaux of anthropomorphic taxidermy simply are brought to life in *The Tale of the Fox*.¹¹ This re-animation of dead animals, however, is imperfect, for, as Heather Crow observes of Starewitch's insect films, the "slightly jerky quality of [Starewitch's] animation announces itself as a gestural after-life, an uncanny life within death" (60). Along with the jerky animation, Starewitch's dead animal puppets suffer from, in Donald Crafton's words, a "total lack of 'cuteness'" that he argues is inherent in their taxidermic quality, a quality that becomes softened in *The Tale of the Fox* (242). While the taxidermic quality Crow and

Crafton refer to is indeed softened in *The Tale of the Fox*, traces of its origins remain, both in the animal puppets' appearance and in their actual construction.

Within the film, recurring skull and skeleton imagery reinforces the underlying paradox of animal life and death, constantly reminding viewers of both the physicality and mortality of the animals that the puppets represent. It also serves as a visual reminder of the largely invisible systems of animal capital by simultaneously representing the animals as whole bodies and reducing them to mere parts in a way that ironically hints at *The Tale of the Fox's* reliance on dead animals. In an inversion of taxidermy's role in producing hunting trophies, the Wolf's cabin features bare animal skulls mounted on the wall. In reality, hunting trophies only retain the animal's hide, which is stretched over a modeled replica of the animal's skull (Desmond 161). While this inversion of the traditional hunting trophy reflects the fact that the Wolf and his family consumed all of the animal's flesh, leaving just the bone, it also serves as a visual reminder of animals' physical, mortal bodies. This skeleton imagery recurs again when Reynard plays with a bird skull while peeling and eating the last remnants of flesh from it and when Reynard dreams of Death as a hooded animal skeleton.

Even within the film's wide array of skeletons, one scene stands out in the film for its use of an animal skeleton to engage with this issue of the living and dead animal body. In this scene, the Rooster brings the dead body of his wife the Hen, who was killed and eaten by Reynard, before the Lion King and his court. A sheet featuring the image of a bird skeleton covers the body; this sheet is removed, revealing the Hen's skeleton, still clothed, but picked clean of flesh. One of the Hen's baby chick's sits next to the body, plaintively chirping, "Mama," while looking at the bare skull (see fig. 5 and fig. 6). The figure of the dead Hen stands as a prime example of the sutured hybridity achieved by the animal puppets in the film. She blurs distinctions between animal and human because her body is not the squat, fowl-like body of a hen, but the elongated body of a human with distinct arms and legs upon which sits the head of a hen. Furthermore, her corpse is posed and carried in a fashion traditionally reserved for deceased humans. Along with this animal-human suture, the hen's corpse or, rather, skeleton engages with the interplay between animal life and death that I have been discussing in this section. As a pseudo-skin, the skeleton sheet covers and protects the Hen's corpse, which has lost its original skin, while also hinting at the reality of animal death that lies underneath it. The disturbing and repellant quality of her skeleton (a quality intensified

by the plaintive baby chick) unsettles viewers by forcing them to confront the invisibility of animal death, an invisibility facilitated in many ways by systems of animal capital that shield the public eye from the slaughtering of animals for human consumption. This disturbing and unsettling quality also evidences the film's foundation in medieval fables with the brutal violence it enacts on the Hen's body.



Fig. 5. The skeleton sheet covering the Hen's corpse. (YouTube. Web. 20 March 2012.)



Fig. 6. The corpse of the Hen with baby chick in left hand corner. (YouTube. Web. 20 March 2012.)

Humanism and Posthumanism: Puppet Automata and Shared Finitude. At the final site of suture, *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets participate in both a humanist discourse founded on a notion of Cartesian dualism and a posthumanist discourse that prompts a greater evaluation and consideration of nonhuman animals on the basis of Cary Wolfe's concept of shared double finitude. Starewitch's animal puppets, in many ways, are a literal representation of Descartes's theory that animals are natural automata (61). In *The Tale of the Fox*, Starewitch creates puppet automata that mimic the natural automata (animals). Ironically, Starewitch imbues his puppet automata not just with what Descartes calls the "purely mechanical and corporeal motion" or "corporeal soul" of animals, but also the "incorporeal" or "thinking substance" Descartes reserves for humans (61). In the film's aforementioned opening with the monkey projectionist, it is important to note that this puppet, alone out of all the other animal puppets, is placed into the frame by a non-puppet human hand, which then admonishes the puppet with a wagging finger. In response, the indignant monkey sticks out his tongue at the human off-screen before starting the projector. This scene highlights the sense of human dominance that underlies the entire film. Regardless of how the animals function within the film, they are still created and controlled by a human hand. By sticking out his tongue at the human hand, however, the monkey suggests that he possesses a mind capable of actively resisting his body's subjugation by the human. Other puppets, particularly Reynard, also display this type of resistance.¹² Reynard not only outwits his fellow animals, but also successfully manipulates the humans to do his bidding on several occasions, most notably when he leads the humans to animals he has trapped (the Wolf, Bear, and Cat) so that the humans can beat and maim the animals. Reynard's manipulation does not dismantle the anthropocentric hierarchy; the beatings of the Wolf, Bear, and Cat are violent reassertions of humans' ability to dominate and subjugate the animal body. Rather, Reynard's tactics show an animal working within the existing hierarchy while still maintaining a sense of autonomy and agency.

The sense of animal agency also surfaces at the film's end when three animal puppets directly acknowledge the ending of the film, displaying a meta-awareness that they are participating in a performance being recorded on film: the fox cub throws aside his diaper, directly acknowledging the camera and audience as he announces, "That's all folks!"; Reynard appears outside of the book and closes it before bowing to the camera and audience; and the monkey projectionist turns off the projector before bowing to the camera and audience. This display of animal participation and awareness is cut short,

however, when, as the monkey projectionist bows to the camera, the human hand from the beginning of the film reappears, grasps the monkey puppet by the ear, and yanks him out of the frame. The human hand then places a sign reading “Fin” in front of the film projector and thus truly ends the film. The relationship between monkey puppet and human hand exemplifies the reality that a certain amount of antagonism must exist between humans and animals in order to preserve any kind of intelligible distinction between the two. Karl Steel suggests this antagonism between humans and animals functions as a necessary component in maintaining an anthropocentric hierarchy, concluding that “[d]ominance, and therefore the human, must fail where there is no suitable object to be dominated” (“How to Make a Human” 17). Then again, the living human presence in *The Tale of the Fox* is only a hand, not a whole human body. This fragmentation of the human body suggests that human control of the animal body is partial and incomplete and that the animals represented by the film’s puppets do maintain a sense of agency in spite of human control.

At the same time *The Tale of the Fox*’s animal puppets engage with and resist a humanist, anthropocentric discourse, they also participate in a posthumanist discourse, where the stressing of shared finitude suggests a greater consideration of nonhuman animals. Part of the theory of posthumanism outlined by Cary Wolfe involves the necessity of “acknowledging that [the human] is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically ‘not-human’ and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is” (xxv). The prostheticity of the animal puppets recreates and re-inscribes the prostheticity of the human. Animals are not pure, innocent beings of nature; they are historical and cultural subjects entwined with humans. The reality of the lack of distinction between nature and culture is more easily detected and expressed with animal puppets than with real, living animals.

In addition to this prostheticity, the animal puppets also embody the two kinds of shared finitude, “two kinds of passivity and vulnerability,” that Wolfe identifies: “The first type (physical vulnerability, embodiment, and eventually mortality) is paradoxically made unavailable, *inappropriable*, to us by the very thing that makes it available — namely, a second type of ‘passivity’ or ‘not being able,’ which is the finitude we experience in our subjection to a radically ahuman technicity or mechanicity of language” (88). According to Wolfe, the two types of finitude are intertwined: “our *relation* to flesh and blood is fatefully constituted by a technicity with which it is prosthetically entwined, a diacritical, semiotic machine of language in the broadest sense that exceeds any and all presence, including our own” (92). The animal

puppets, through their representation of animal bodies, speak to both kinds of finitude. The physical, mortal vulnerability obviously surfaces in the violence done to the animal puppets, particularly the scenes where the Wolf, Bear, and Cat are beaten severely by humans. *The Tale of the Fox's* insistence on injuring, killing, and stripping the flesh from animal bodies momentarily breaks the spell of the anthropomorphic fable, as we are reminded that these are animals with whom we share a certain corporeal vulnerability. While not as immediately visible as the first type of finitude, the second type of shared finitude of being bound by the prostheticity of language also appears in the film. Its anthropomorphized animals can talk and are able to communicate with humans to some degree. The fact that the film is in French, however, creates a passivity or vulnerability for non-French speaking viewers, which creates a more readily visible identification with the animals. Admittedly, such passivity or vulnerability exists at any point where there is the "ahuman technicity and mechanicity of language," including for French-speaking viewers of the film. Yet this effect becomes more visible when the language in question is not known. Although there are English subtitles in the YouTube videos of *The Tale of the Fox*, these subtitles introduce yet another level of mediation between the animal puppets and the viewer and another instance of how language renders a shared passivity and vulnerability.

The shared passivity and vulnerability in the face of language becomes more complicated within the context of film. Discussing the interplay between language and film, Lippit writes: "Film does not replace language, for it cannot exist without it. Film displaces language, exposes the abyss that threatens to engulf every semantic signification. Film parasitizes language, much as the animal does, drawing into its imaginary panorama that which remains undisclosed in discursive transactions" (124). In a sense, film lays bare the ways in which language restricts and confines humans and animals. Film removes language from its usual space, effectively revealing the prostheticity of language. In using the verb "parasitizes," Lippit characterizes both the animal and film as parasites that exist at the expense of their host, language. Unlike the passivity and vulnerability of Wolfe's second type of finitude, the idea of film and the animal as parasitizing language depends upon a certain degree of empowering agency. When viewed in this light, *The Tale of the Fox's* animal puppets, in spite of their shared double finitude, possess agency in the sense that they lay bare the ways in which language, both the spoken French and written English, restricts and confines humans and animals. In having a French audio track and English subtitles attached to them, the

film's animal puppets (as parasites to language) reveal the technicity and mechanicity of language. This posthumanist discourse fuses with a humanist discourse in which the animal puppets are subjected to the technicity and mechanicity of animal puppet automata. This suture between humanist and posthumanist discourses unsettles distinctions as the animal puppets simultaneously exist as models of Cartesian dualism and posthuman prostheticity that both fall victim to human subjugation and exert power as parasitic agents that expose these underlying systems. *The Tale of the Fox* peels back the skin of language to expose the visual spectacle of flesh and bone animal bodies.

Disavowal and Compromise: The Animal Puppets of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. In his overview of the history of stop motion film, Ken Priebe notes that “nearly 80 years of history behind the theatrical puppet feature began with Starewitch’s *Tale of the Fox* and has come full circle with Wes Anderson’s *Fantastic Mr. Fox*,” a film whose visual aesthetic takes direct inspiration from Starewitch’s film (57). Despite this shared visual aesthetic, the animal puppets of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* are not nearly as complex as the animal puppets of *The Tale of the Fox*. *Fantastic Mr. Fox* relies on a disavowal of the physical animal body despite the realistic animal puppets. For example, the animals in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* can be electrocuted (the cartoonish flashing of their skeletons occurs) but are apparently unharmed. When animals do die in the film, their eyes are replaced with X’s, which mark the only trace of death on their bodies. The corpse of the Hen picked clean of flesh in *The Tale of the Fox* transforms in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* into the familiar sight of a plucked, ready-to-cook chicken available at the grocery store. In order to be reminded that these puppets are representations of real animal bodies, the viewer has to seek out supplemental materials such as behind-the-scenes featurettes and the book *The Making of Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Only then can one find the dissected animal puppet bodies, safely sheltered from the general public and given humane treatment in the “puppet hospital” (Specter 50, 54, 55). This sanitization and sequestering of the animal puppet body mimics the removal of animal slaughter from the public sphere.

Furthermore, the gleeful sadism and rebellion of *The Tale of the Fox*'s animals becomes, in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, a meek submission to their fate as altered “wild” animals who must live in sewers and survive off of a cornucopia of synthetic and imitation supermarket food. While it is tempting to read this shift as a positive and pragmatic step for animals in a world so heavily contaminated by human presence, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*'s animals' fate comes across as melancholy and sterile. In order to achieve this new “wildness,” the animals must surrender a certain level of bodily autonomy. The animals cannot possess physical, mortal bodies of flesh and bone held together by skin. They must become like the “synthetic goose” and “artificial squab” on which they now subsist. In contrast to

these “wild” animals, *The Tale of the Fox’s* puppets fiercely hold on to their physical bodies even in their fragmented, decorporealized state on YouTube.

Conclusion: Puppet Hybridity and the Trouble with Animal (Puppet) Agency. In Shukin’s double animal sign of disembodied signifier and mere material and Kay’s sutured skin of the medieval book, traces of physical, material animal bodies remain. While these traces are subtly visible in the vellum pages of medieval books (the imperfections and veins in the skin/page remind readers that the book was once a living animal), the rendering of animals to produce film stock removes any recognizable visible trace of those animal bodies. In *The Tale of the Fox’s* animal puppets, the double rendering of animals as puppets and puppet-making material (a kind of twentieth-century reworking of medieval vellum books) merges with the double rendering of animals on film and in film stock. This merge results in a state of sutured hybridity in which the dependence on a material, physical presence allows *The Tale of the Fox’s* puppets to achieve a far greater level of complexity and richness than those in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. *The Tale of the Fox’s* animal puppets burst at their seams with contradictions. Refusing to settle on one side of a suture, they project an image of sutured hybridity in which they are both products of a medieval past and a technologically mediated future, animal and human, alive and dead, and participants in a humanist and posthumanist discourse. Nonetheless, a persistent, nagging quandary plagues any reading of *The Tale of the Fox’s* animal puppets. Can the film ever really depict animal agency if humans control the puppets? In other words, are the film’s attempts to show animal agency a perverse pantomime? If we view them purely as products created by Starewitch, then the animal puppets truly cannot have agency. However, as representations of animal bodies and as sutured hybrid beings who unsettle numerous boundaries, the animal puppets do possess agency. Regardless of the control or original intent of their creator, these animal bodies can be read by twenty-first century viewers as autonomous sutured hybrid beings who call us, as humans, back to a consideration of animal bodies and our moral and ethical responsibility to them. In case we have forgotten, *The Tale of the Fox* shows us what lies under the skin of an animal.

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Notes

1. Ladislav Starewitch's name has multiple spellings: Ladislav Starewitch, Ladislav Starevitch, Ladislav Starevich, Ladislav Starewicz, or Wladyslaw Starewicz. *The Tale of the Fox* also goes by numerous names: *The Tale of the Fox*, *Le Roman de Renard*, *The Tale of Reynard*, or *Reineke Fuchs*. For continuity, I use the spelling Ladislav Starewitch and refer to the film as *The Tale of the Fox* throughout the essay.

2. Discussions of the uncanny feature prominently in animation theory. See Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (48-49); Alan Cholodenko, "Introduction" to *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation* (29); Cholodenko, "Speculations on the Animatic Automaton" (500, 509); and Heather Crow, "Gesturing toward Olympia" (50, 56).

3. Scholarship on *The Tale of the Fox* is limited in both scope and breadth. This essay aims to correct this paucity by providing a more detailed, scholarly evaluation of this understudied film.

4. In film studies, suture is defined as a narrative strategy or procedure employed by a film through relationships between shots and how they are cut and edited together (Butte 297; Silverman 195, 201). Neither classical suture theory in which sutures function as "deceptive consolations" that evade the disturbing, discomforting experience of absence or Butte's revised theory of suture as a "narrative of embodied consciousness" (284, 288) applies here because, in my concept of suture, the act of suturing results in disturbance, and, although Butte claims his approach reinstates the physical body, his theory of suture nevertheless foregrounds consciousness and subjectivity, relegating the physical body to the periphery.

5. While DVDs of *The Tale of the Fox* have been released in other countries, these DVDs are not only in Region 2 or PAL format but are currently out of circulation and only available as used copies at inflated prices. A Region 1, US formatted DVD of *The Tale of the Fox* has never been released. For people in the US, the most accessible and feasible way to view the film is on YouTube. All images are taken from screenshots of the YouTube videos. The YouTube videos are titled "The Tale of the Fox – Wladyslaw Starewicz (1930) Part 1/6 (English Subtitles)" and are uploaded by an individual with the username "MissBillieDove." 1930 reflects the year when filming was finished, not the film's theatrical release date.

6. See Martin Wallen's discussion of foxes in folklore (39-71).
7. Many critics have written about animals or "the animal" in medieval studies. See, e.g., Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human*; Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*; Susan Crane *Animal Encounters*; Brigitte Resl, ed. *A Cultural History of Animals in the Medieval Age*; Aleksander Pluskowski, ed. *Breaking and Shaping Beastly Bodies*, and *The Animal Turn* special issue of *Postmedieval*.
8. See Hye Jean Chung's discussion of the material traces of computer animated animal bodies in the 2008 film *Kung Fu Panda* (27, 32).
9. Lorraine Datson and Gregg Mitman argue that while anthropomorphism allows humans to "orchestrate" animal performance, "complete mastery is illusion" (13).
10. Karl Steel, in discussing the human-animal border in Middle English literature, argues that "subjugation resolves the various, shifting boundaries between humans and nonhumans into a single line separating humans from all other living things" ("How to Make a Human" 7).
11. See Heather Crow's analysis of the Quay brothers' stop motion films for a discussion of puppet gesture and movement.
12. This resistance can be traced back to Goethe's version of the Reynard fable. Wallen argues that Goethe not only identifies with Reynard, but "purifies vulpine intelligence of its roguish displays in order to draw out the aloofness of the fox, which belongs to no society" (53). By identifying with Reynard and placing him outside a corrupt and sinful human society, Goethe questions the superiority of the human. This questioning of the anthropocentric hierarchy carries over to *The Tale of the Fox*.

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